

Phelps' Tavern
Litchfield, Connecticut

HABS CONN.-79

HABS
CONN.

3-LIT

12

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Connecticut

Historic American Buildings Survey
Harold H. Davis, District Officer
29 Whitney Ave., New Haven, Conn.

PHELPS' TAVERN

Litchfield, Litchfield County, Connecticut

This structure was demolished March, 1939

Date of Erection: 1785

Architect or Builder: David Buell, builder

Number of Stories: Three and one-half

Materials of Construction: Stone foundation
Exterior walls - wooden clapboards
Roof - wooden shingles
Brick chimneys

Other Existing Records: Old Inns of Connecticut -
M.D. Terry.

List of Photographs:

1. Front Elevation (South)
2. West Elevation

HABS CONN.-79

HABS
CONN.

3 Lit

12-

PHELPS' TAVERN

Litchfield, Litchfield County, Conn.

At this writing, one of Litchfields' best known landmarks, famous Phelps' Tavern, is being demolished by the wreckers hammers. This hotel is the oldest in Litchfield County, and probably in the State, in point of continuous service.

It was built in 1785 by David Buell, a successful merchant of the town who had conducted a tavern about a mile east of Litchfield. He was, besides being a tavern keeper, a dealer in "Ladies Stuff Shoes", exchanged sole leather for cash or flax, was Litchfield agent for a State lottery for raising money for public works, and was joint publisher of the Monitor, the town journal. The tavern was later sold to John Phelps. The late Eugene L. Phelps was probably its best known proprietor.

This historic inn, which stood on East Street overlooking the Green, had a lofty assembly room, or ballroom on the top floor, around the sides of which ran a broad and comfortable divan.

Here many of the gala balls were given in the earlier times. To realize what gayety and what personalities this famous ballroom knew, one must recall that Litchfield was the home of one of the earliest law schools, that being the one conducted by Judge Tapping Reeve and which knew students such as Aaron Burr, Joseph Calhoun, Uriah Tracy and James Gould, who later himself conducted the school. The town was also the home of Miss Pierce's Female Academy, one of the first women's educational institutions in America, and both these schools made good use of the facilities at Phelps' Tavern for their social functions. The invitations to such events were sometimes printed on the backs of old playing cards, and the Litchfield Historical Society have in their possession some of these. Probably the most famous ball ever to be held here was one in honor of Lafayette in 1824.

Phelps' Tavern, as it was called in early days and also in recent years, knew one interim in which it was known as the United States Hotel. The building which is now being

HABS CONN.-79

HABS
CONN.

3. Lit

12-

PHELPS' TAVERN

Litchfield, Litchfield County, Conn.

demolished, was considerably remodeled from its original state, much of this being done after a fire in 1911. The present property owner, Mr. Louis Bird, is expected to replace this building with a new hotel, and although Litchfield will be losing a most famous landmark, it will likewise be gaining a much more modern hostelry.

Sources of Information: Old Inns of Connecticut
(M. D. Terry)
History of Litchfield 1720.
(A. C. White)

Author:

John F. Flanagan

Approved:

Harold H Davis · Date: *June 23 1939.**John Flanagan*